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March 7, 2003
Immediate Release

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Environment Department Concerned with Lab's Impact on Water Resources

(Santa Fe, NM) — Due to a series of recent findings and events, the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) today expressed its continuing concern with Los Alamos National Laboratory's (LANL) impact on local water resources.

These concerns include:

- Detection of contaminants in the main ground-water aquifer at Los Alamos, including the toxic chemical perchlorate which has been found in samples from Los Alamos County production wells and most recently in LANL tap water.
- A recently completed NMED assessment of data indicating that contaminants historically discharged by LANL have migrated deep into groundwater and are now in the vicinity of Santa Fe's Buckman Wells.
- The discovery of a previously unknown springs with elevated levels of perchlorate, chloride, nitrate, tritium and uranium that discharge directly into the Rio Grande.
- Pollutants, including historically high levels of plutonium, in storm-water run-off from the lab.

"Due to our state's severe, chronic drought, the lab's impact on our water resources has been magnified," said Environment Secretary Ron Curry. "But vital information that should flow freely between LANL and the public has been restricted for some reason. This Department intends to do all that it can to inform the citizens of New Mexico whenever it receives validated information concerning toxic pollutants, especially in the water we need to drink and live."

Perchlorate in LANL Tap Water

Using a state-of-the-art method, NMED's Department of Energy (DOE) Oversight Bureau has recently detected perchlorate at levels up to 0.5 parts per billion (ppb) in the tap water at LANL's Technical Area 3. These results are further evidence of the lab's adverse effect on the aquifer from which it, and the towns of Los Alamos and White Rock, draw their drinking water.

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No national standard yet exists for perchlorate levels in drinking water. The States of Maryland and Massachusetts have adopted advisory levels of 1 part per billion for perchlorate. The U.S. Environment Protection Agency (EPA) has also published a draft toxicicity assessment of 1 ppb for perchlorate in drinking water. NMED has proposed adding perchlorate to the Water Quality Control Commission's toxic pollutant list and a hearing on the proposal will be held in June 2003.

Perchlorate is used at LANL to process plutonium and has been shown to interfere with thyroid gland function. According to EPA, it can be especially harmful to children and pregnant women.

"These recent findings underscore the need for the laboratory to address perchlorate and other contaminants as quickly as possible," said Secretary Curry. "That's why NMED issued an order to the laboratory and the Department of Energy last November mandating perchlorate monitoring, investigation, and cleanup. To insure the health and safety of the public, this work needs to be done."

NMED is working with the Los Alamos County Water System to monitor the system's perchlorate levels. The Department is also investigating the development of a health advisory for water systems that are found to have perchlorate present.

Storm-Water Runoff

NMED recently reported historically high levels of plutonium in storm-water run-off collected from a canyon leading from LANL property to the Rio Grande. In addition, the toxic substances selenium, mercury and PCBs have recently been detected at elevated levels (some of them exceeding State surface water quality standards) in run-off after storm events.

River Diversion

Both Santa Fe and Albuquerque have announced plans in recent weeks to divert water from the Rio Grande in order to augment overtaxed municipal water supplies. NMED believes that storm-water run-off data and the recent discoveries of a bank-side springs in White Rock Canyon with elevated levels of perchlorate, chloride, nitrate, tritium and uranium should be taken into consideration as these plans are pursued with greater urgency due to the on-going drought.

Espanola Basin Workshop

Recent data from springs and wells at the lab also suggests movement of contaminated groundwater "plumes" beneath LANL. The travel times implied by these waters with chemically similar fingerprints are more rapid than LANL's computer model previously calculated. Although not yet fully understood, analysis of these chemical fingerprints may suggest that the contaminated waters are moving southeast, toward the city of Santa Fe's Buckman Well Field, at a rate of several hundred feet per year, not several feet per year, as LANL's model states.

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Many of these findings were summarized and presented by NMED staff at the 2nd Annual Espanola Basin Workshop held this week, which included scientists from the United States Geologic Survey and the New Mexico Bureau of Geology.

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